



INTRODUCTION TO COUPLES COUNSELLING

DAY THREE

WELCOME!



2 THEME FOR DAY THREE

- Therapy Models that emphasise ‘Differentiation’:
 - Bader-Pearson Developmental Model
 - Dr David Schnarch Crucible Process
 - Terry Real Relational Life Therapy

3 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE TWO QUESTIONS

- What problems might the couples counsellor encounter in maintaining a therapeutic balance or fair & equal treatment between partners?
- How should the therapist handle a couple where one partner wants to stay & the other is thinking of leaving?

4 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE

Identification / Aversion / Transference

Gender; Age; Ethnicity; Social Class; Sexual Orientation; Religion; Behaviour; Personal Interests; Therapist constructed as 'parent'.

5 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE

Partner Differences

Self-awareness; Communication skills;
Assertiveness; Motivation.

6 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE

Practical Issues

Time-keeping; Communication between sessions;
Arranging appointments; Seeing partners
individually.

7 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE

- How might the therapist counter threats to balance?

8 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE SUMMARY

Raises dilemmas for the therapist around:

- Self-awareness; impartiality; boundaries
- Therapeutic approach
- Attitude to working with partners individually
- Transparency vs. confidentiality (1st weekend)

9 ETHICAL ISSUES: THERAPEUTIC BALANCE SUMMARY

Raises dilemmas for the therapist around:

- Who is the 'client' (partners or relationship)?
- Who is the judge of balance?
- Policy decisions / clear Ts & Cs!

10 ETHICAL ISSUES: TWO QUESTIONS

- What problems might the couples counsellor encounter in maintaining a therapeutic balance or fair & equal treatment between partners?
- How should the therapist handle a couple where one partner wants to stay & the other is thinking of leaving?

II MIXED AGENDA COUPLES

- The couple therapist might be tempted to try one of the following approaches:
 - Attempt to coax the reluctant partner to come around to working on saving the relationship;
 - Explore the reluctant partner's reasons for wishing to leave the relationship.

There are inherent problems with both these approaches.

12 MIXED AGENDA COUPLES DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

- Pioneered by American therapist, Dr. William Doherty;
- Specifically for the 'mixed agenda' couple;
- Short term, intensive process lasting 1-5 sessions.

13 MIXED AGENDA COUPLES DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

This isn't couples counselling because:

- There is not yet an agreement to start couples counselling;
- Goal is to gain clarity about a direction for the relationship;
- Discernment Counselling is not aimed at solving their problems, but rather at working out whether or not their problems can be solved.

14 MIXED AGENDA COUPLES DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

- Three possible outcomes:
 - Continue with the relationship status quo (**path one**);
 - Separation or divorce (**path two**);
 - Work on the relationship for 3 – 6 months in couples counselling (with a ‘no exit’ rule agreed), following which a decision can be made whether to continue or separate (**path three**).

15 DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

FIRST SESSION: 40 MINUTES

Joint session, of around 40 mins. Used to ask four core questions:

- **Divorce narrative:** *'What has happened to your marriage that has got you to the point where divorce is a possibility?'*
 - **Repair narrative:** *'What have you done to try to fix these problems so that you didn't get to this point?'*
 - **Children's question:** *'What role, if any, do your children play in your decision making about the future of your marriage?'*
 - **Best of times:** *'What was the best of times in your relationship since you met? A time when you felt the most connection and joy in your relationship.'*
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16 DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

LEARNING-OUT PARTNER INDIVIDUAL SESSION: 35 MINUTES

- Validate their pain & frustration; probably rule out path one;
- Summarise their reasons for path two;
- Focus on path three;
- Explore their sense of their own contributions to the problems in the marriage;
- Summary & check whether further session required.

17 DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

LEANING-IN PARTNER INDIVIDUAL SESSION: 35 MINUTES

- Listen with empathy to their position for no more than 15 mins;
- Clarify the person's desire to save the marriage, & why;
- Describe the three paths, and offer to help open the door for path three;
- See if the leaning in spouse 'gets' the concerns of the other & is willing to work on them;
- Focus on coping, & learning about self;
- Summary.

18 DISCERNMENT COUNSELLING

COUPLE SUMMARY: 10 MINUTES

- A summary from each partner. No expectation of a response from the other partner;
- Therapist: words of appreciation; themes emerging;
- Schedule next session if appropriate;
- Emphasise not to expect relationship changes between sessions since that's not what discernment counselling is for.

19 STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP

- Freud & Erikson models
- Models for stages of relationship

20 STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP BADER-PEARSON DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

- Attachment, Differentiation & Neuroscience
- Stages of development
- I-I dialogue
- Self-change goals

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STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP

FIRST STAGE - ROMANTIC LOVE (SYMBIOSIS/EXCLUSIVE BONDING)

- *‘The price you pay for the bliss of romance is to hide your true self’*
- State of euphoria
- Chemicals in the brain
- Marked absence of individuality
- Goal is forming a strong bond; enjoying time together

22 STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP HOW TO FALL IN LOVE

- Find a complete stranger;
- Reveal to each other intimate details about your lives for half an hour;
- Then, stare deeply into each other's eyes without talking for four minutes.

(Professor Arthur Arun (1997))

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STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP

SECOND STAGE – DIFFERENTIATION (MANAGING ANXIETY OVER DIFFERENCES)

‘Romantic Love sticks around long enough to bind two people together. Then it rides off into the sunset. And seemingly overnight, your dream marriage can turn into your biggest nightmare.’ ([Harville Hendrix](#))

- Tensions: symbiosis vs. autonomy; security vs. eroticism;
- The emergence of ‘otherness’, disagreements;
- Goals: expression of individuality, mutual understanding; toleration of difference.

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STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP THIRD STAGE – EXPLORATION (MOVING FROM ‘WE’ BACK TO ‘I’)

- Individuation (Jung) / Practising (Bader)
- Goal is to develop a strong identity apart from the relationship
- Timing of individuation between partners

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STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP FOURTH STAGE - RE-CONNECTION (BACK AND FORTH PATTERNS OF INTIMACY)

- Tolerance & respect for the differences between two separate 'I's
- Improved handling of conflict
- Enlivened sexual relationship
- Goal: integration of intimacy & autonomy

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STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP FIFTH STAGE - SYNERGY (INDEPENDENCE & INTERDEPENDENCE)

- Intimacy deepens
- Each partner can manage their emotional reactions
- The relationship ('we') has its own synergy
- Goal: partners often desire to create something together & to give back to the world (legacy)

27 STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP WORKING WITH THE STAGES

- Each stage has different goals
- When do couples usually turn up to couples counselling?

28 STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP WORKING WITH STAGE TWO

- When inability to differentiate threatens to end the relationship
- Difficulty agreeing on major decisions (marriage, kids, where to live etc.)
- No fixed timeline relative to relationship

29 WORKING WITH STAGE TWO WHAT FUELS THE INABILITY TO DIFFERENTIATE?

- Emergence of ‘otherness’/conflicts of interest threaten attachment security & triggers primal anxiety
- Attachment style (AAI): influences individual’s focus of needs & defensive strategy (hostile/conflict-avoidant)
- Desire to revert to the safety of symbiosis
- Inability to reconcile differences (differentiate)

30 DIFFERENTIATION

‘The active, ongoing process of defining self, expressing & activating self, revealing self, clarifying boundaries, & managing the anxiety that comes from risking either more intimacy or potential separation.’

(Ellyn Bader)

3 | BLOCKS TO DIFFERENTIATION COPING STRATEGIES BASED ON ATTACHMENT STYLE

- Denying difference to avoid conflict (avoidance; agreeing with partner; merging; using the ‘we’ word) or;

32 BLOCKS TO DIFFERENTIATION COPING STRATEGIES BASED ON ATTACHMENT STYLE

- Engaging in angry escalations hoping to force partner to concede (hostility; domination & control; potential domestic violence); or

33 BLOCKS TO DIFFERENTIATION COPING STRATEGIES BASED ON ATTACHMENT STYLE

- Stonewalling & transferring pressure to partner to sort things out; refusing to differentiate or self-define (passive & passive-aggressive partners).

34 BLOCKS TO DIFFERENTIATION COPING STRATEGIES BASED ON ATTACHMENT STYLE

- Note that all three defensive strategies are avoidant of vulnerable intimate emotional communication

35 REFLECT UPON YOUR OWN PATTERN WITH CONFLICT

- Think about what you do that's ineffective;
- Reflect upon the vulnerable feeling under your anger;
- Think about a new behaviour that you'd like to develop in yourself (e.g., if you get emotionally flooded, try to stay in a more cognitive role);
- Think of a metaphor/cue word to represent this.

36 WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

Direction:

- Take charge
- Permission to Interrupt

37 WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

Communication Skills:

Triangulation: hostile speaker

- Skills in non-confrontational communication;
- ‘Initiate rather than Dominate’;
- *‘Can you speak about what you would like rather than what your partner is not?’*

38 WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

Triangulation: hostile listener

- Remind listening client to be ‘curious, not furious’;
- *‘How can you become less reactive & more reflective?’*;
- Alternative approach: ‘matching energy’ of hostile;
- Dialogue: importance of validation;
- Use of ‘red cards’.

39 WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

For escalating anger:

- Time Outs
- Setting Limits on Conflict
- Three Circles
- Ineffective Behaviours that Partners Use to Cope
- Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

40 WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

- Move chairs back to back;
- Prepared Speech:

'I'm sorry but I can't allow you to do that here. We need to do something different from what happens at home. What you are saying is very important, but I need to help you to express it in a way that your partner can hear you. Would you let me help you? You deserve what you are asking for, but the way you are asking for it is guaranteeing that it is not going to happen.'

4 | WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

- Leaving the session to cool down
- Pad & paper
- Individual sessions

42 WORKING WITH HOSTILITY

Building Bonding & Positivity:

- Appreciations
- Ending the session
- Dependable contact

43 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE DIAGNOSIS

Two conflict-avoidant partners:

- Agreeable, quiet, 'we' language, presenting 'joint' issues, vagueness, deflection, maybe signs of anxiety & / or suppressed frustration
- Not 'in love' / boredom / lack of sex / infidelity

44 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE DIAGNOSIS

Conflict avoidant with hostile partner:

- Classic 'pursuer/alooof' destructive cycle
- Counselling initiated by hostile (to 'fix' partner)
- Hostile feels 'unloved'. Avoidant feels overwhelmed
- Avoidant may have passive aggressive tendencies

45 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE DIAGNOSIS

Try to establish the reason/s for avoidance:

- Fear of the consequences of defining self
- Limited self-awareness / numbing-out (trauma?)
- Difficulty expressing self
- Social conditioning
- Tactical: stonewalling / lies / passive aggressive

46 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE DIAGNOSIS

- Pre-session questionnaire answers: confidentiality vs. transparency?
- Confidentiality: circular questioning to see what's revealed / individual sessions?

47 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO AVOIDANT PARTNERS

- Key skill: judging ‘window of tolerance’; how & when to challenge – slow & gentle = safe

but

- If they seem easy to work with, in what way might you be colluding with their avoidance?

48 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO AVOIDANT PARTNERS

- What are the presenting issues & who 'owns' them?
- Content vs. process: how is the relational dynamic blocking differentiation & the ability to negotiate?

49 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO AVOIDANT PARTNERS

- Psychoeducation:
 1. The nature of the dynamic (illustrate?)
 2. Avoidance: pros (validate / normalise) & cons (dangers)
 3. Differentiation – introduce dialogue asap

50 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO AVOIDANT PARTNERS

Watch for:

- Resistance to emerging self definition, '*You shouldn't feel like that.*' etc.
- The possibility that the 'elephant in the room' is a potential relationship deal-breaker

51 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO HIGHLY AVOIDANT PARTNERS

'If we don't talk about it, our marriage is over. If we do talk about it, we fear it might spell the end of our marriage.'

- Short-notice session cancellations
- Defensive body-language / palpable tension
- Perspiration / twitching leg
- Little to say / afraid to talk / forced humour

52 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO HIGHLY AVOIDANT PARTNERS

- Go very slowly, build safe working alliance
- Triangulation initially with plenty of validation / reassurance
- Assess partner self-awareness (feelings / needs sheets)
- Can they share feelings in the here & now?
- Can they identify what they fear?
- What might make it safer to share / share more?

53 WORKING WITH CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE TWO HIGHLY AVOIDANT PARTNERS

- Watch for opportunities to gently challenge
- Set homework (is it avoided?)
- Partner motivation? What do they have to lose? What might they gain? For what in the 'dance' do they own responsibility?
- Set partner-identified self-change goals that challenge avoidance & are meaningful to the couple

54 WORKING WITH AVOIDANT & HOSTILE PARTNERS

- Combination of hostile & avoidant working techniques, as appropriate
- Likely to require more triangulation in which the therapist models alternative interactions that the partners are failing to provide one another